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A Path to work life

By Leow Si Wan

FROM 41 students just six years ago, enrolment at Pathlight School has jumped to more than 500.

The school, which caters to children with autism, a developmental disorder, has a waiting list, and receives more than 200 applications a year.

A child may need to wait up to two years for a place, depending on his needs and the availability of a suitable class.

With demand for places growing, the school has turned its attention towards better preparing students for employment. Yesterday, it unveiled several initiatives at the official opening of its new \$34 million campus in Ang Mo Kio.

One of these is a retail store that will showcase students' products, provide them with a source of income and expose them to a work culture.

Among the other facilities are an industrial kitchen and an expanded cafe, where its students can work. The kitchen is a training centre for students pursuing the Institute of Technical Education-approved certificate in baking.

The 1.6ha campus has 45 classrooms, sports facilities and special subject rooms for art, music, and design and technology.

Speaking at the opening of the campus yesterday, Education Minister Ng Eng Hen described the bigger push by the Education Ministry to cater to special-needs students and added that Pathlight's unique brand of education had benefited many who have 'flourished under the care and guidance of their teachers'.



But efforts are not restricted to within the school. Mainstream schools are being roped in to integrate autistic students and those with special needs into society.

Chong Boon Secondary School, just a stone's throw away, and Bishan Park Secondary School in Sin Ming Walk are two schools that have established partnerships with Pathlight.

Under this collaboration, Pathlight's secondary students are taught by their own special education teachers in self-contained classes in these schools, and interact freely with their mainstream peers during recess and when sharing facilities.

Dr Ng, sharing anecdotes on students who have performed well and moved on to institutes of higher learning such as the polytechnics, said these stories show that the efforts are on the right track.

Pathlight's supervisor, Member of Parliament Denise Phua, said at the opening: 'We want every child, able or not able, to receive a quality education that blends both academic and life skills; an education that gives them opportunities that mainstream school students enjoy.'

Going forward, Pathlight will continue forging partnerships with industry partners so its students can find jobs. Starbucks Coffee, for example, has opened up barista positions to a few students.

For senior students and alumni, an Information Technology (IT) school and a lifelong learning club will be set up within Pathlight to encourage continuous self-improvement.

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Yesterday, some of Pathlight's first batch of GCE O-level graduates received their certificates amid loud cheers. The majority of its students are on the track leading to these examinations, while 10 per cent are on a vocational track.

Huang Kaisong, 19, one of six students who took the O levels last year, now studies IT at Temasek Polytechnic.

He said: 'I am very happy to have graduated. At Pathlight, the learning pace was slower and my teachers were very patient and caring.'

This article was first published in [The Straits Times](#).